

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

SHOEBILL *BALAEANCEPS REX*: A DELETION FROM THE KENYA AVIFAUNA

It was with a blend of interest and concern that we read I.S.C. Parker's (1984) admission of an orchestrated hoax which resulted in the erroneous inclusion of the Shoebill in the avifauna of Kenya, both in Britton (1978) and Britton (1980).

Though there is no proper evidence that the Shoebill has ever occurred in Kenya, it is worth placing a 1969 experience on record. Prior to the partial draining of Yala Swamp, as part of an agronomy and food production project in 1970-72, we were privileged to spend a day in the then undisturbed swamp. In a canoe, we traversed about 12 km of papyrus in the southwestern part of the swamp, from the edge to the Yala River, along the river, and back to our point of entry. It was a rewarding experience which we will always cherish. Species endemic to papyrus, such as Papyrus Gonolek *Laniarius mufumbiri*, were numerous, and it became clear from discussion, in the Luo language, that our guides knew the Shoebill. They said that it was only the occasional individual seen, rather than territorial or sedentary birds. We have not visited Yala Swamp since 1972, but the damage done, apparently irrevocable, precludes the opportunity to confirm or refute the occurrence of this magnificent bird in Kenya.

REFERENCES

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- PARKER, I.S.C. 1984. Shoebill *Balaeniceps rex*: a deletion from the Kenya avifauna. *Scopus* 8: 79.
- Peter & Hazel Britton, All Souls' & St Gabriel's School, Charters Towers, Q 4820, Australia* Received 10 February 1985
- Scopus* 9: 50, June 1985

GROUND NESTING OF EMERALD-SPOTTED WOOD DOVE *TURTUR CHALCOSPILOS*

On 26 September 1983 a nest of an Emerald-spotted Wood Dove was located along the coast 17 km north of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania at 6.37S, 39.11E. The nest contained two eggs and was unusual in both its construction and siting. The surrounding area is coastal bush with adjacent mature gardens and local *shambas*. There is no shortage of available normal nesting sites, and the dove is common in the area. However, this nest was on the ground, a sand bar formed inland of a bay and associated mangroves. The nest was well away from any trees or bushes but just inside the overhanging stems of a creeping legume that is a common early colonizer of exposed sand. These stems offered a certain degree of camouflage but no other protection. Dead plant material around the nest also aided its concealment.

The nest was a slight depression among this debris, its material consisted of a few short twigs and dead grass stalks, certainly much less than the usual 'twiggy' structure built by the species. The sand could be seen clearly through the nest and actually formed the slight cup holding the eggs. There is no known record of any *Turtur* species nesting on the ground, although it is probably more common than this one record would suggest (D. Goodwin pers. comm.). Interestingly, J.S. Ash (pers. comm.) found that nests of *T. chalcospilos* in Somalia were often exposed on the tops of small bushes.

A direct result of the chosen nest site was that the nest and contents were exposed to the sun when the sitting bird left. When the nest was first found, at 11:00, the incubating bird sat tight (even compressing its feathers to reduce its apparent size) allowing a close approach of 2m before flying away. A return visit 30 minutes later to photograph the nest found the bird standing astride the eggs, panting. No gular flutter was observed during this rather heavy panting, although this is recorded for doves above 40C (D.L. Serventy in Farner & King 1971). Clearly the bird was shading the eggs from the sun and it seemed more concerned with that than my presence several metres away. Eventually photographs were obtained from 3m. During the several minutes used for photography the bird remained motionless and stayed over the eggs while I moved away. There is no known record of any species of Columbidae shading its eggs to cool them. It has been suggested (D. Goodwin pers. comm.) that the eggs were too warm for the adult to bear against its skin and this, rather than the need for shade shade, prevented the bird from sitting. However, body temperatures above 44C have been recorded for doves and the instinct to incubate is strong.

Even assuming that this particular individual had always been a ground nester, its action in shading the eggs seems remarkable. It implies that the bird sensed that the eggs were too warm, and therefore needed cooling. It is likely that heat from the sand and direct heat from the sun (after I had flushed the bird) increased the temperature of the eggs considerably, probably approaching 40.5C, which is the maximum survival temperature in domestic hens (R. Dent in Farner & King 1975).

Thermosensitivity through the bill is recorded for other members of the Columbidae which would perhaps rarely have need of this facility, and its development in the family is probably slight. However, these observations suggest that it may be far from dormant, and that it can be utilized when necessary. Slides taken of the bird standing astride the eggs are lodged in the British Museum, Tring. Unfortunately it was not possible to return to the site and the outcome of the clutch is unknown.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Mr Derek Goodwin for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this note.

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Scopus 9: 50-52, June 1985

PROTECTIVE BEHAVIOUR IN A NESTLING RED-CHESTED CUCKOO
CUCULUS SOLITARIUS

In early December 1984 my wife found the nest of a Robin Chat *Cossypha caffra* situated at the base of a potted *Cymbidium* orchid in our garden at Langata, near Nairobi, Kenya. The cupped nest, although partially concealed by the long green leaves of the orchid, was only 1.5 m off the ground and allowed easy observation from above. The nest contained two eggs, the smaller being heavily marked with dull reddish brown on a paler background, the larger she described as being bluish in colour, and had probably been laid by a Red-chested Cuckoo (later proved correct). Several days later my daughter noticed that a chick was present and that one egg had been evicted and was lying undamaged a few centimetres outside the nest.

I observed the nestling, clearly a cuckoo, possibly 7 - 10 days after hatching; unfortunately no accurate record of dates had been kept. With unimpaired observation from above, the cup of the nest was completely filled by the nestling cuckoo which, unless disturbed, remained absolutely still. The plumage was striking in that the whole was deep slate with off-white elongated spots giving the impression to Robert M. Glen, who was with me, of a tightly coiled adder. Small feathers appeared to grow forwards from the forehead, virtually concealing the black bill and giving a blunted semblance to the head.

The initial impression of a coiled viper was reinforced when a finger was pointed towards the nestling. When reaching to within some 3 - 4 cm from the dormant bird, suddenly, with an apparently calculated lunge and stab, the head would be shot forward with a wide open bright orange gape, enough to make the most hardened snake-catcher recoil in alarm.

Robert Glen likened the nestling's reaction to the striking of a Tree-viper *Atheris* sp. which he had encountered in the Impenetrable Forest of western Uganda; these aggressive small snakes also have a wide gape with an orange mouth colour.

Despite a wide search in published literature, including Friedmann (1968), I can find no reference to similar protective behaviour demonstrated by other nestlings of the cuckoo family. The only photograph of a recently fledged bird I was able to locate which gives some idea of the reptilian appearance of the nestling is in van Som-